

Speech to the Knesset by the Prime Minister of Italy, the Hon. Matteo Renzi  
Jerusalem, 22<sup>nd</sup> July 2015

Mr. Speaker of the Knesset,  
Prime Minister,  
Hon. Leader of the Opposition  
Members of the Knesset,

I have long practised several greetings in your language, then it occurred to me that the best way to begin this speech would be to use the most beautiful greeting in the world: shalom, and thank you for inviting me.

It is with deep respect that I speak before you in the name of the Government of Italy, in a city whose very name arouses strong emotions: Jerusalem. The Psalm conveys to us the image of tribes ascending to the Temple while singing their joy to approach the Holy City and praising the name of the Lord. To imagine those women and men ascending to Jerusalem as pilgrims is deeply touching. But according to the Bible “the seats of Judgment, the seats of the House of David” were also in Jerusalem. Therefore, to visit your assembly is to carry out a secular pilgrimage: the secular pilgrimage of women and men who all over the world tirelessly demand peace for Jerusalem, since demanding peace for Jerusalem means to build peace for us, our brothers, our friends.

Today, politicians here and everywhere in the world know that it is not enough to demand peace for Jerusalem. Peace must be achieved, and no one can pretend they do not know: peace depends on everyone’s commitment, no one excluded. The history of our peoples shows that the achievement of peace requires personal commitment . My fatherland, Italy, was restored to freedom exactly seventy years ago against Nazi-fascism. Young and not so young people from each corner of our Country risked their lives and in some cases sacrificed them for the ideal of freedom. I salute them. And I salute those extraordinary women and men who came from different countries and contributed to the endeavor from your own reality.

I think for example of those who lived as the bearers of a dual identity; founders of the new State of Israel and devout patriots of an anti-fascist Italy. My mind goes to the name of Enzo Sereni, an advisor to Ben Gurion, who first abandoned a comfortable life in Rome to found kibbutz Givat Brenner then, after saving many lives in Nazi Germany , parachuted himself into occupied Italy and was captured by Nazis and killed in Dachau His name will live forever. I think of another great Italian, a central figure in the Jewish community of Italy, former Chief Rabbi of Rome Elio Toaff. Rav Toaff fought against the indignity of racial laws which since 1938 have been a source of perennial shame to our Country, then committed himself to the liberation of Italy from Nazi-fascism and was among the protagonists of Reconstruction in postwar Italy. A man of dialogue, he was the promoter of the historical visit Pope John Paul II paid to the Great Synagogue in Rome, to the very Temple where we said our last goodbyes to him (Rav Toaff) a few weeks ago. He left us a few days before turning 100 years, which he had lived in the service of his Country and of our own future.

But I should also like to remember those who were not Italians, who did not even know our country well and nevertheless engaged themselves directly. Please try, honorable members of the Knesset, to imagine a young man seventy years ago. A young Jewish man who decides to enlist as a volunteer in the Jewish Brigade. Who decides to risk his life – his most precious possession – for the freedom of unknown persons; my grandfather, my father, for my freedom and that of my children and my grandchildren. Imagine if one of those young men could be here today. How proud the people of Israel would be of him. And how grateful we all would be. Not all young men of the Jewish Brigade left us, honorable members of the Knesset: one of those young men who fought for my freedom then is really here today. Mr. Asher Dishon, we bow before you, as a young member of the Jewish Brigade who came to Italy to fight to set us free. Mr. Dishon, thank you from the bottom of my heart for what you did for my people. Mr. Asher Dishon, thank you for sharing this moment with us today in the Knesset.

Toda' Raba', Mr. Dishon,  
Toda' Raba', Enzo Sereni  
Toda' Raba', Elio Toaff

Achieving peace, however, does not only depend on the physical defense of freedom, but on a cultural challenge. I chose to begin my official visit in your Country by visiting a place which is a very important symbol, Tel Aviv University. I am convinced that visiting Universities is a duty – and a pleasure. From Stanford to Humboldt, from Georgetown to Nairobi University in Kenya, where last week I decided to remember the young students of Garissa.

In my opinion universities, research centers, schools are places where the full force and beauty of the human capital emerges. They are not merely a diversion from protocol and official programs. They are the places where a deep relationship is built. Universities are the laboratories of freedom and strategic cooperation.

I was impressed by the energy of your young people and your professors. I admired the richness of this Start-Up Nation: the relationship between Universities, Venture Capitalism and new companies is one of the least known aspects of Israel outside Israel. Such cultural richness, such hunger of the future, such mental energy!

I have been welcomed by the signature of cooperation agreements and I attended a nice debate whose title is “I-Cube: Italy, Israel, Innovation. From knowledge to growth”. Therefore I should like to say that those who think of boycotting Israel do not realize that they are boycotting themselves. We may have legitimate differences on specific subjects: it has already happened and it certainly will happen again as it is normal in the day to day history of a friendship, but the Knesset should know that Italy will always be on the front line of cooperation, never of boycott.

I am here to reaffirm the bond that unites us not just in our memory but in building our future. It is very easy for Countries as ours to be proud of our past, consisting of stories that made a mark on mankind, from King Salomon to the Renaissance. For centuries in our lands we forged a culture capable of influencing human progress. But being passionate about our future is just as important as being proud of our past.

University agreements help us in this direction. A few weeks ago I visited the CERN in Geneva, where Italy and Israel together lead in exploring the constitutive substance of the universe, full of wonder and emotion towards what is infinitely small and powerful.

A community of men and women who by studying our origin write our future. with confidence. Together. Terrorism wants to make us die a horrible death. When it fails, it seeks to let us live a horrible life, as prisoners of our fears, without any possibility of dialogue, giving up on ourselves, on who we are.

Universities, scientific research and culture are not only fundamental parts of our identity but first and foremost the frontier of this challenge: the places that help us be ourselves, open and ready to live, difficulties and menaces notwithstanding. Obviously I know full well the security considerations that apply not just to this region but a much larger area. The world of today is not only characterized by instability, circumscribed and limited to a region. Small-scale attacks motivated by religious extremism are carried out by European citizens within the borders of Europe. At the same time large-scale attacks hit the planet: from the United States to Australia.

Italian troops are engaged day after day in Lebanon, in Iraq, in Afghanistan, in Kosovo and they will be everywhere it becomes necessary to join forces with the international community to stop the barbarism. Because this is what it is about: a fight against barbarism, a resolute fight between a violent extremist minority and the overwhelming majority of those who believe in the values of dialogue and civilization.

Between those who bet on death and those who invest in life, between those who darken their intelligence in the shadow and those who let light accompany them, we know very well which side to take. We shall never cease, not even for a moment, fighting from the right side. Together with you, of course. With our historical allies and friends, the United States, the indispensable reference for entire generations in international endeavors for peace. Together with the United Nations, highlighting the role of Russia which we want to be a global player rather than the isolated neighbor of a fearful Europe, together with your Arab neighbors, notably the moderate ones, who clearly understand the need to preserve this land from a new escalation. I am talking about several countries, Jordan and Egypt to begin with, authoritative communities that can help us come closer to stabilization and peace.

A few days back, the terrorists who attacked the Italian Consulate in Cairo thought they could intimidate and divide us. But they pursued the opposite effect: we are now even closer to the Egyptian government in facing together our common challenges. We are still doing the same, carrying our wounds on our hearts.

Just a year back your cities were under attack. Just a year back, the warning siren was not sounding for an exercise. The populace, forced to find safety in the shelters, found protection under the umbrella of the new defense technologies. In Gaza, destruction and death left a deep mark. And shortly before that, three Israeli children were abducted and brutally murdered. I want to recall their names: Naftali, Eyal, Gilad. For we feel that they are also our children. And we keep on following the commitment of their parents, which is an example of dignity for the whole world.

Naftali's mother who teaches the importance of meeting with here courage. She has searched for another mother, that of Mohammed, an Arab child who was brutally burned alive.

But the peace that we demand for Jerusalem will only be reached when the project of two states for two people is achieved. This can only happen if the full security of all is granted, with the fulfillment of the right to self-determination of the Palestinian people and the right of the Jewish people to their national state. I am affirming this here in this honorable hall, I will affirm it in a few hours in Bethlehem to the Palestinian authorities.

The existence of the State of Israel is not a gracious concession of the international community following the Shoah. The existence of Israel predates by centuries any international agreement. And the State of Israel exists in spite of the Holocaust.

Somebody today still tries to doubt the right of this State to exist. Based on all that we have said until now, it is clear to one and all that you don't only have a right to exist. You have the duty to exist. The duty to exist, the duty to resist, the duty to pass on to your children but also to my three children. Francesco, Emanuele, Ester.

And we will always be at your side in this challenge.

At the same time, Italy will do everything to allow the Palestinian Territories to escape the difficult condition where they are, starting with the economic situation. A significant part of international cooperation, to which we give increasing attention, has been historically devoted to this area: we will keep on encouraging with care and dedication. And this afternoon I will visit the Center for Peace of the John Paul II Foundation and the Casa Famiglia Focolare di Dio. The restoration of basic economic conditions and of investment in the education of younger generations are key for restarting any territory. And even more so of today's Palestine, to which Italy confirms all its attention and dedication.

There have been and there still are, among us, different opinions, assessments, evaluations. It happened in the past. The Iranian issue is one of those cases today. I understand your concerns and I have noted the alert raised by your leaders.

Together with the United States of America we believe that this agreement can be a useful compromise to make this region less insecure. I want to be very clear: no compromise will ever be possible on Israel's future. And we don't do this for respect or generosity. We must be extremely clear and explicit: your security is our security, too. Friends of the Knesset, we share roots and values, we said that before. But we also share something much bigger: we share our destiny, and nobody can ignore this. Abraham's children must therefore demand peace for Jerusalem, because peace for Jerusalem means peace for the whole world.

While preparing for this speech I re-read some paragraphs of the Bereshit, which we call "Genesi" in Italian. And I was impressed by the events told in Genesi 14, 13-16, when a fugitive who escaped the ongoing war between the kings of those lands informs Abraham of the abduction of his son Lot.

Two passages struck me. Abraham wins in spite of his limited number of soldiers and in spite of being placed at a disadvantage. And it is the only occasion where Abraham is called "The Jew" in the Torah.

The scholars of rabbinical thought tell us that Abraham is thus called because he, and only he, had the courage to reach the other side. He is the prophet who managed, through an initial choice of solitude, to see "a beyond", another world.

We need this ability to go beyond. To see beyond. Abraham's children can achieve a durable peace only if they will embrace this ability.

Mr Speaker,

I told you and the members of this Assembly the emotions that I feel achieving this secular pilgrimage to Jerusalem.

Allow me please to tell you, at the conclusion, the starting point. We all are citizens of the world, and yet we all are clinging to our origins, to our cities. For this reason too, allow me please to salute the President of the Italian Jewish Community, Adv. Renzo Gattegna, who is honoring us with his presence.

I come from the noble city of Florence. In Florence, many are the symbols, which recall our friendship. A wonderful Synagogue. And I was very proud of having lighted it up as the opening act of my administration. Before that, from the heights of Florence, it was impossible to perceive the synagogue, and I thought that was wrong. I go back to all the stories that I encountered yesterday, walking in the abyss and the light of Yad VaShem. I go back to the people who lost their life, who were deported, I go back to my friend, who survived the Holocaust and, as a Florentine, would accompany entire generations of students and public institutions to Auschwitz. His name is Nedo Fiano, and I would like his name to resonate in this hall.

Every time he traveled with us to Auschwitz, Ned told me: "Matteo, this is painful for me, because on this track I met the blue eyes of my mother for the last time. But I do this, I go through that pain again and again, so that the new generations it may be a duty to remember and to pass on and to live life fully".

How many exceptional stories in the examples of those catholic nuns who not only saved the Pacifici family, but also the faith of those children. At night, it was a custom for the children in the Florence convent, to kiss the cross worn by the nuns. Having two children in hiding among them, in order to ensure that the other would not notice them, the nuns would let them approach, but in respect of their faith, they would cover the cross with their fingers, thus preserving their identity. And it is beautiful to think that one of those children became the President of the Jewish community of Rome. And furthermore, going back to my city, what pride did i feel when Yad VaShem acknowledged Gino Bartali, cycling champion, winner of two Tour de France, as a Righteous among the Nations, because he saved brothers who were perhaps even strangers to him. Every Italian city has similar stories.

In conclusion of my speech, I would like to go back to the image of culture and beauty. Of course, the beauty of those who saved the lives of other brothers and sisters is extraordinary, dizzying, endless. In my city lays the beauty that express itself through culture. There are many symbols, the Uffizi's paintings, the monuments in the museums, in the churches, in the synagogue. But one is the symbol of Florence in the world: Michelangelo's David, the absolute masterpiece of his genius, beauty

made stone, beauty recovered only by removing what was excessive, as Michelangelo himself would say.

I enjoy thinking of David, of the symbol he represents in your culture, which is our culture. Just like David, each and every one of us is called to live a life of difficulties and challenges, but also a life where one can bring the values of the past and carry them by the hand towards the future. We, the people of Italy, the government of Italy, we feel thankfulness and respect for you. And keeping our heads up, we also tell you that, although in some occasions we do not agree on everything, we have the same opinion on something fundamental: your destiny is our destiny; your security is our security; together, we will build a more fair, more beautiful, more equal world.